

Race, Social Cohesion and the Changing Politics of Citizenship

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ABSTRACT The relationship between race, social cohesion and citizenship has become an important issue in recent political and policy debates. In this paper these questions are explored in the context of the changing forms of ethnic minority political engagement and participation that have evolved in the past two decades. We suggest that there are growing tensions in policy debates about the boundaries and limits of multicultural policies, particularly focused around the issue of social cohesion.

Race, Politics and Democratic Governance

In recent years we have seen a growing debate in the public sphere and in academic circles about the relationship between democratic institutions and the realities of multiculturalism in British society. This has often been linked to concerns, expressed even more vociferously after the urban violence of 2001 and events of September 11, about whether Britain has moved 'too far' in the direction of multiculturalism and diversity for the good of political and social cohesion. Such debates have been given added currency in the aftermath of the comments by Trevor Phillips, current head of the Commission for Racial Equality, that multiculturalism may now be a problematic policy agenda because it 'suggests separateness' (*The Observer*, 4 April 2004). They have also been shaped to some extent by the politicisation of asylum and immigration issues over the past decade or so. All in all such developments have produced a climate that some have compared to the aftermath of Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of blood' speech in 1968.

It is of some importance in this climate to engage in a reasoned debate about the changing politics of multiculturalism and citizenship. It is with this overarching concern in mind that we want to engage with these debates from a critical perspective by drawing on our recent research on a project that focused on the changing forms of ethnic minority political participation in contemporary Britain. In an attempt to move beyond the crude criteria of voter turnout and opinion polls that characterises much political analysis, we set out to identify and

examine the less recognised as well as traditional political stages on which ethnic minority activists and organisations intervene on issues of interest to them. Our work considered the nature of ethnic minority political participation in Birmingham and the London boroughs of Lewisham and Tower Hamlets. We conceptualised these case studies as part of a formal public sphere of politics. Added to these, we explored what we called the alternative public sphere of voluntary and community sector activity, including for example the work of ethnic minority housing associations, arts projects and campaigns around deaths in custody and refugees. We also recognised the growing importance of umbrella organisations that work closely with both the formal and alternative spheres and are yet sited somewhere between the formal and the alternative public spheres, such as the National Assembly Against Racism, Operation Black Vote and the National Civil Rights Movement—these we conceptualised as occupying the space of a transitional sphere of political participation (Shukra et al., 2004). Although education was not a specific theme in our research, in the course of our observations and data gathering we observed and examined debates about multiculturalism and issues about the educational experiences of ethnic minorities as they were staged and contested in all three spheres: amongst community and voluntary organisations, within ethnic minority coalition groups and across the main arenas of governance. As academics with a background of research and writing on race, racism and black politics, we embarked on this project intensely aware of the history of ethnic minority interventions and debates about multicultural and antiracist education policies. This paper is based on the debates and data relating to education that emerged in the course of conducting the project.

From Integration to Social Cohesion

Shortly after we began our research project there were outbreaks of social unrest in Burnley, Bradford and other towns in the north of England. Whereas the primary focus of urban disorder in the 1980s and 1990s had been on the central role of Caribbean young men, these twenty-first century riots were noted for featuring as central participants young Asian men [1]. As before, the riots were met with a combination of hard policing, race relations measures and official inquiries into the immediate and underlying causes of the riots (Cantle, 2001; Burnley Task Force, 2001; Denham, 2001; Ouseley, 2001; Oldham Independent Review, 2001). The investigators produced quite similar findings and emphasized the role of conflicts between different majority and minority communities in shaping the conflicts. It was in this context that official responses to the riots emphasised the need for measures aimed at fostering *social and community cohesion*, and this theme has since become primary policy driver across New Labour social policy. What had previously been termed *integration* was now called *cohesion*. Kalra (2002) captures some of the meanings of cohesion as a social policy category when he argues that it refers to communities where:

- There is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities.
- The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued.
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities.
- Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods. (Local Government Association et al., 2002:6).

The question was whether such cohesion was to be achieved through communities themselves arriving at compromises through the everyday hurly burly of formal and informal contact or through New Labour institutions defining the citizenship and

Britishness that people would have to sign up to. Put crudely, could social cohesion be used for progressive ends or was it inherently assimilationist?

It had already become evident in New Labour's approach to asylum seekers and refugees that there was an uneasy balance in official rhetoric between a language of assimilation and integration that harked back to the 1960s and a language of community cohesion that was looking for ways to move beyond the 1980s multicultural orthodoxy (Back et al., 2002). Most of the assimilationist language came from the government itself, particularly in its policy response to immigration and events of September 11. The yearning for moving forwards rather than backwards was expressed by a wide range of policy makers and thinkers, including Herman Ouseley (2001) and Trevor Phillips (2004). Phillips in particular expressed a wish for Britain to move on from what he saw as divisive 1980s style multiculturalist policies (*The Guardian*, 28 May 2004).

Another intervention in these debates came in 2004 in *Prospect* magazine and *The Guardian*. It was inspired by David Goodhart's (2004) argument that Britain has become 'too diverse' through immigration to maintain a welfare state. Goodhart had criticised multiculturalism and posited it against a more desirable monoculturalism. In the absence of an alternative, multiculturalism had become accepted as the preferred option of leftists and so it was widely viewed as Phillips' responsibility as head of the Commission for Racial Equality to defend multiculturalism. When he did not, he caused a panic amongst the growing black middle classes and their allies as people tried to fathom what his statements could possibly have been intended to achieve. A month later, Phillips clarified his position as one of arguing against multiculturalism for its limitations and failures in integrating ethnic minority communities and that he intended his comments might produce a constructive debate.

That Phillips comments caused such a furore was in itself quite revealing. His views not only appeared to echo the concerns of the right, but also opened old wounds, increasing fears that assimilationist style policies might be reconstructed. In the 1960s and 1970s an assimilationist approach to integration dominated government thinking and local authority education policy and practice. The Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council—set up in 1962 to advise the Home Secretary on matters relating to the welfare of immigrants and integration matters—promoted the idea that cultural differences obstructed integration. The CIAC presented the idea that the problem of Commonwealth immigrants and their children was that they were visibly distinguishable by the colour of their skin with backgrounds from societies whose habits and customs are very different from those in Britain.

It was in this assimilationist framework that education policy locally took the form of authorities dispersing Asian children geographically by bussing them from their homes out of the immediate area in order to maintain quotas and separating Asian children from mainstream classes by placing them in reception classes and English as a Second language classes. African-Caribbean communities experienced this model of integration in the form of a high number of their children being labelled as 'educationally sub-normal'. Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 allowed the Home Secretary to pay grants to local authorities to employ staff to tackle differences in areas of high immigrant pupil populations.

As minority communities of the 1970s and early 1980s organised and fought back against some of the injustices they identified in the education of their children, the dominant assimilationist approach to educating ethnic minority pupils was challenged and a liberal, pluralist approach emerged in the form of multi-cultural education, endorsed as the way forward in *Education for All*, a report published by the DES in 1985. This reflected the recognition that schools were comprised of pupils from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, all of which had the right to be recognised as valid and equal.

Whereas assimilation focused on minimising difference by changing the ways of the minority groups, multiculturalism in education reflected the idea of an ethnically plural

society in which all ethnicities or cultures would be regarded as equally valid. For anti-racists such as Sivanandan at the Institute of Race Relations, multiculturalism didn't take into account the racism experienced by black people in education. It was too much given to celebrating difference and too little engaged in confronting issues of racial violence and systematic discrimination (Blackstone, 1999, p. 106). For the authors of the Burnage Report (Macdonald et al., 1989) multiculturalism in the form of a moral anti-racism and token policies gave the impression that much was being done for ethnic minority communities at the expense of white children and produced a backlash, allegedly contributing to the death of Ahmed Ullah, a 10-year-old boy in Manchester. The end of anti-racism (Gilroy, 1990) was reinforced by scandals around 'political correctness' (Parekh, 1998, p. 17) and ongoing criticisms that local authorities and education institutions had to respond to. Multiculturalism survived as an overarching, acceptable approach to multi-ethnic education amidst other forms of education such as mainly Catholic and Anglican faith-based schools. Multiculturalism in education and more broadly represented a settlement between ethnic minority communities and the state's institutions (CARF, 2002).

Since multicultural education has come to reflect the ethnic pluralism of British society, attacks on one are viewed as attacks on the other. Contemporary challenges to multiculturalism have come primarily from the right in the form of the grotesque demand for 'rights for whites'; the clamour for recognition of St George's Day as a national holiday; the idea that alternative ethnic identities might be a threat to 'Britishness'. Other challenges have come from the liberal left. David Goodhart's essay, for example, posits ethnic diversity against 'high social cohesion' and argues for social policies to be based on integration through a greater acceptance of shared national values and history. Goodhart's views echo the views of Ray Honeyford (1988) that multiculturalism leads to social disintegration and that multiculturalism produces a collapse of moral values. In this context, Trevor Phillips' comments calling for an end to a preoccupation with multiculturalism understandably unleashed panic and fear that he was endorsing the arguments of the right and playing to the moral panics centring on Islam, asylum seekers and migration from an expanded EU. Whatever his intentions had been, Phillips' comments begged three questions:

- If not multiculturalism, then what? Is Phillips demanding some fresh thinking and a new strategy or is he supporting a return to assimilationism?
- What about racism, exclusion and discrimination? Is he forgetting that communities have had to organise separately in response to their experiences of these?
- What about the state's growing recognition of institutional racism through Macpherson's recommendations and the Race Relations Amendment Act?

Phillips' comments were also construed and interpreted as an attack on the now established race equality services. Debates relating to ethnic minority communities and education are increasingly read through the lens of this One Nation, assimilationist contestation of multiculturalism. Our case studies confirmed that these discourses and developments also affect how the state's expansion of minority faith school provision are viewed and read: Blunkett's proposal to school refugee children in detention centres; debates on the future of black history month; a debate on the meaning of citizenship and its relevance to formal and informal education and the national curriculum.

Citizenship: the new anti-racism?

Since the introduction of citizenship classes into the national curriculum in 1998, debates about the meaning of democracy and citizenship in a multi-ethnic society have included the question of what form the teaching of citizenship should take. The Stephen Lawrence

Inquiry (Macpherson, 1999) called for changes to the national curriculum to ensure that it values cultural diversity and addresses racism. Although citizenship was developed as a subject in the national curriculum because of government concerns about low voting turnout in the 18–25 age group; rising levels of youth crime, exclusion and fears of the alienation of young people from public values (Crick, 2000), the Education Secretary responded to the Macpherson report by arguing that the recommendations were already being addressed through the introduction of citizenship teaching (Tomlinson, 2003). However, the meaning of citizenship education itself was contested. Whereas Bernard Crick (1998, pp. 17–18) argued that ‘majorities must respect, understand and tolerate minorities and minorities must learn and respect laws, codes and conventions as much as the majority’, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (Parekh, 2000) was amongst those groups that argued for citizenship education to be used as a vehicle for anti-racism.

The expansion of government policy and legislation directly relating to citizenship education in a multi-ethnic context added to the debate as commentators and professionals considered the implications of new developments such as:

- The report into the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (Macpherson, 1999).
- The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which extended the provisions of the 1976 legislation to cover public services.
- The Human Rights Act to ensure that authorities and the government act in a way that is compatible with the European Convention of Human Rights.

At the time of our research these new developments seemed to provide race equality professionals and policy staff with new optimism in their battles for race equality and social justice. In the course of interviews, these developments in policy were frequently cited as offering new hope for the future direction of equality work, including the development of race equality action plans that were to be regularly monitored.

For those concerned about who would define the values and content of citizenship education, the possibility of teaching citizenship ‘within a human rights framework alongside other issues of inequality’ offered a way forward (Ibrahim, 2004, p. 8). Whilst guidance from the Crick report tended to favour an assimilationist model of citizenship education, the government’s new legislation provided scope for a more radical, anti-racist content. Sarah Spencer from IPPR and CRE argued that ‘Human rights principles are the essence of social and moral responsibility, and thus should lie at the heart of citizenship education, and not be peripheral to it’ (Spencer, 2000: 22). Spencer suggested that international human rights standards could provide a values framework in which conflicting interests and moral dilemmas might be discussed and debated akin to the Parekh report’s call for a deliberative democratic framework in which contested issues could be thoroughly debated, aired and settled (Spencer, 2000). Spencer called for a Human Rights Commission to monitor and oversee implementation of the Human Rights Act and recently, a new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) has been announced (Home Office, 2004).

Social cohesion is linked to New Labour’s notion of citizenship. Namely, that a cohesive Britain requires that its citizens (those with British nationality, including asylum seekers who have sworn allegiance to the queen and taken classes in English) share a value base and actively participate in the electoral processes. In education, this has resulted in a huge expansion of citizenship classes dedicated to asylum seekers—across the private as well as the public sector. However, much of contemporary adult citizenship education is narrow and assimilationist in approach, offering potentially offensive language teaching akin to the 1970s television programme *Mind Your Language* or mentoring despite the possibility of more holistic, experiential and respectful ways of running adult education.

Citizenship education—whether for young people or adults—has the potential, however, to encourage political participation in a broader sense. Osler (2000) argues that ‘racism remains a major barrier to participation in society’ and that ‘Crick’s definition of political literacy needs to be expanded to ensure that politically literate citizens are able to recognise and challenge racism as an anti-democratic force’. Osler’s (2000) expansion of political literacy takes us into the realm of citizenship education as *political education* in the Freirian (1996) sense as opposed to Crick’s notion of *political literacy*. Political literacy for Crick amounts to a ‘compound of knowledge, skills and attitudes’ (p. 72) whereas political education implies the development of a critical understanding of the individual’s experience and position in society, social structures and processes of social change.

Differences between political literacy and political education can be most clearly identified in the youth work context where political literacy has become a staple of most participation work over the last few years. This has resulted in the growth of a range of youth work models that use informal education methods to ensure that the processes and institutions of British democracy are understood and valued. Youth workers encourage young people to join local youth councils or youth forums. These are sometimes connected to youth parliaments, often mimicking the structures and decision-making processes of local and national governance.

An approach utilising political education could, by contrast, be less concerned with valuing and using existing political structures and more focused on developing a process through which people might discuss and challenge the way in which a particular issue is understood. The result might be a critique of decision-making structures or, as suggested by Osler (2000), a challenge to barriers to participation and democracy. Lewisham Young People’s Participation Project was set up and driven by a process of political education—involving young people critically reflecting on their experiences of the police and other officials (Back et al., 2000) in order to redefine and address problems—but has more recently become preoccupied with matters of structure and governance as the country’s first Young Mayor was elected in April 2004 alongside a young people’s citizens panel.

One of the things that is absolutely absent in the current climate is any attempt to seriously listen and engage with young people who are living and to some degree fashioning a version of what it means to live in a multi-ethnic society at the level of their everyday experience be it in the playground, neighbourhood or youth club. It may just be that they have a more informed sense of how to live in a multicultural world than is often appreciated. Recent studies have pointed out that beneath the headlines young people themselves are living and making a kind of multicultural Britishness (Harris, 2004) under the very noses of politicians and policy makers who wring their hands within concern.

Beyond New Assimilationism?

Current debates about race relations and immigration are caught in a conundrum: how to challenge the weaknesses of multiculturalism without reinforcing conditions for the rise of a new assimilation? The community cohesion agenda on paper seeks to encourage a greater level of mixing between ethnic groups and discourages separate provision. The danger here is that there might be a reversion to policy and provision that is blind to cultural differences as in the 1970s and 1980s. Those policies and organisations were criticised as failing to address the backgrounds, the lives, the realities and the needs of ethnic minority families. Would an emphasis on ethnically mixed provision be different in the twenty-first century?

One clue towards how a new form of mixed provision could be framed emerges from discussions of 'global citizenship' (Ibrahim, 2004) and 'global youth work' (Youth & Policy, 2003). Ibrahim argues that globalisation and increasing levels of migration challenge the idea of a singular citizenship based on loyalty to a nation-state. Ibrahim calls for a sense of 'interculturalism' or a capacity to reflect on different experiences and perspectives and to increase understanding of diverse needs and rights across cultural boundaries.

The 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act also included sections on citizenship, demanding that those migrants allowed to enter and settle develop a 'shared sense of belonging and identity' and acquire a knowledge of the language (English, Gaelic or Welsh), while offering new citizens the opportunity to celebrate the acquisition of their new nationality (Home Office, 2002, p. 1). It is interesting to note that the government has shifted increasingly since 2001 towards a language of 'integration' and of the need to 'maintain and develop social cohesion and harmony within the United Kingdom' (Home Office, 2002, p. 27). The rhetoric of social cohesion reflected concerns voiced in the Cattle report into the disturbances of summer 2001, but none of the government's proposals or policies address either the racism that ignited the riots in Bradford, Burnley or Oldham or the social deprivation experienced by the minorities and the majority in those areas. Terms such as integration, inclusion, exclusion are deployed in various policy discourses, such as education, poverty, health so that they become normalised and their ubiquity obviates any need for a discussion of their meaning—they acquire the status of common sense. It is presented as obvious that those who settle in Britain should respect and embrace 'our values', should seek to share our 'sense of belonging and identity' (Home Office, 2002, p. 3). Citizenship classes, already introduced for school children, are now to be made compulsory for those wishing to naturalise in order to help 'them' fit into 'our' society. Bernard Crick has been placed in charge of 'Citizenship Task Force' and has produced a list of recommendations based on his consultations with various bodies as to what such classes might deal with. So far, *The Crick Group* has detailed recommendations about the level of proficiency in English (at ESOL entry 3 or equivalent) that will be required for those applying for British citizenship and their spouses and the Home Secretary intends to develop the 'market' for English language teaching. The signs are that New Labour's requirements of new migrants who are seeking to become citizens will be more interventionist and prescriptive than ever.

Controversially, the Home Secretary (Blunkett, 2004) has also begun to outline plans to tackle racism in public services, outlaw the incitement of religious hatred and rebuild the trust of ethnic minority communities in the criminal justice system. These have been combined with expectations of settled ethnic minority communities: to speak English at home, to become active citizens, to build on 'shared aims' across ethnic groups, focus less on differences, avoid 'extremism' and to reclaim the national flags. What the Home Secretary has made clear is that community-driven compromises, settlements and ideas will only be encouraged if they fall within the newly defined framework. Thus, while solidarity and shared national values are encouraged, the innovative coalition created by some Muslim groups and Stop the War that mobilised hundreds of thousands onto the streets of London, is unlikely to be the sort of citizen engagement across ethnic group lines that the government seeks to develop. For there are two key principles that are in danger of being lost in the midst of these debates and policy developments. The first principle that needs to be reasserted is that when social groups are oppressed, as ethnic minority communities most certainly are, they have a right to organise separately should they choose to do so. The primary objective should be to understand and eradicate the constraints experienced by those groups rather than to condemn the victims. The second principle is that of internationalism. The race equality and social cohesion agenda has been presented as a way of tackling the threat to national

homogeneity and security that the forces of globalisation are responsible for (Blunkett, 2004). However, there is a growing recognition in education circles and beyond that local issues need to be placed in an international context to develop ideas of global citizenship and intercultural perspectives that are freed of the constraints imposed by the nation state.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Malcolm Ball for his comments on an early draft. The research was conducted as part of the ESRC's Democracy and Participation Programme. Our research was funded from 2000 to 2003 and was entitled *Democratic Governance and Ethnic Minority Political Participation in Contemporary Britain* (Award No. L215252046). We are grateful to the ESRC and the Director of the Programme, Paul Whiteley, for their support.

Notes

[1] Although Asian young men had been involved in previous disorders, particularly in areas such as Handsworth in Birmingham.

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